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A Community of Ex-Cons Shows How to Bring Prisoners Back Into Society

SAN FRANCISCO

Gerald Miller, a maître d' hôtel at the Delancey Street Restaurant here, could teach a tutorial on his craft. Smile at the diners no matter how annoying they are, he says. And when they have a complaint, murmur, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," while swiftly making it right. None of this is remarkable for someone trained in the restaurant trade. But until he signed on, the only jobs Mr. Miller had held were burglar, drug dealer and armed robber.

The Delancey Street Restaurant, with its staff made up entirely of ex-criminals, is a Bay Area institution, drawing enthusiastic crowds. It is also the centerpiece of the Delancey Street Foundation, where ex-convicts live together, run businesses and move to self-sufficiency. After three decades and 14,000 graduates, Delancey Street is at the intersection of two white-hot trends: the growing focus on "re-entry," the moment prisoners rejoin society, and "social entrepreneurship," using business to tackle social problems.

It is also well positioned ideologically. In a field overrun with liberal and conservative platitudes, it reflects the pragmatism of Mimi Silbert, who holds a Ph.D. in criminology from the University of California at Berkeley and who founded the group with an ex-convict in 1971. Dr. Silbert, who grew up in an immigrant family and worked on a kibbutz, drew heavily on both experiences to create an environment emphasizing hard work and mutual support.

Delancey Street's "third way" — neither harshly punitive, nor mindlessly permissive — has won backers ranging from Senator Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat, to George Shultz, secretary of state under President Ronald Reagan.

Now Dr. Silbert is trying to replicate her model nationally. Working with a foundation that has a federal grant, she is helping to create programs in Virginia, South Carolina

The emphasis is on work, and joining the mainstream.

and Alaska. She may face an uphill battle in an age when the biggest idea in dealing with criminals is "three strikes and you're out" laws, which can put even small-time repeat offenders away for life. But her efforts may help bring down the nation's record prison population, saving taxpayers significant amounts of money and reclaiming some of the people lost in the system.

Delancey Street, which houses 400 people in San Francisco and hundreds more in four other locations, was named for the Lower East Side street where Dr. Silbert's own parents settled. The admissions process for the hardened criminals Delancey Street seeks out — many of whom have spent their lives in gangs or behind bars — is known as immigration. Applicants sit on a bench once used at Ellis Island. For members of this group, Dr. Silbert argues, immigration is an apt term because they are entering society for the first time.

Delancey Street resembles a kibbutz. Residents, who sign on for two years, live in attractive housing on San Francisco Bay built by previous residents and work in the restaurant, the moving company or one of the other ventures. Delancey Street supports itself mainly through its businesses, but also accepts donations. No one draws a salary and, as in a kibbutz, committees of residents — all former criminals, except Dr. Silbert — set the rules.

Dr. Silbert, who raised her twin sons at Delancey Street, says there are many misconceptions about criminals. "The people in prison

don't have a great story," she says. "Most of them are guilty. They feel angry and stupid."

The biggest problem with most rehabilitation efforts, she says, is that they focus on one part of the problem — literacy, job skills or drug abuse — because that is how government finances them and specialists approach them.

Delancey Street's residents — evenly divided among whites, blacks and Latinos, and including 20 percent women — all learn three job skills apiece, and dropouts work toward a high school equivalency diploma.

The organization operates on the principle that the most important thing for its participants to learn is how to build a life in society. Delancey Street has no social workers or therapists. The residents teach and support one another.

A community of ex-cons that runs itself sounds like an idea that wouldn't work. But Delancey Street is orderly and nonviolent. Its graduates move on in large numbers to private businesses, and many go further: one was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and another headed the city's housing agency.

Nearly two-thirds of released inmates are re-arrested within three years, and such recidivism has helped drive the nation's prison population past two million. Most criminals return to crime, Dr. Silber says, because it is all they know. If they learn — or are taught by others, as at Delancey Street — to fit in with the noncriminal world, she argues, most of them will.

Dr. Silbert would like to see states and cities adopt such programs. When critics object that her approach is "soft on crime," she argues that the easiest life for most criminals is back in prison, where their friends are waiting and they will be taken care of. "What is hard on criminals," she says, "is to insist that they be accountable, that they work hard, that they give back."